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Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples

British Virgin Islands

Working paper prepared by the Secretariat

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I. General

1. The British Virgin Islands[1] comprises nearly 30 islands and islets, 16 of which are inhabited. They cover a total of 153 square kilometres and lie 96 kilometres east of Puerto Rico and 225 kilometres north-west of Saint Kitts and Nevis. The most important islands in the Territory are Tortola (54 square kilometres, the largest in the group), Anegada (38 square kilometres), Virgin Gorda (21 square kilometres) and Jost Van Dyke (9 square kilometres). Peter Island and Cooper Island are mainly holiday resorts. Road Town, the capital, is located on Tortola.

2. According to 1995 estimates, the population of the British Virgin Islands was 18,000. Over 90 per cent of the population is of African descent.

II. Constitutional and political developments

Constitutional developments

3. Information on the British Virgin Islands Constitution, the constitutional review conducted by the administering Power in 1995, as well as on the territorial Government and public service, political parties and the 1995 general elections is contained in the previous working papers prepared by the Secretariat (A/AC.109/1142, paras. 13-15; A/AC.109/1180, paras. 6-18; A/AC.109/2017, paras. 3-21; and A/AC.109/2055, paras. 3-11).

III. Economic conditions

A. General

4. The economy of the British Virgin Islands continued to be based on tourism and financial services. Government policies emphasize an ongoing commitment to the development of these two sectors, as well as to broadening and diversifying the economic base. Other objectives of the Government's development strategy are the attainment of sustainable growth by expanding the basic economic foundation and physical infrastructure, maximizing revenue potential and raising the standard of living through more equitable distribution of economic gains.

B. Public finance

5. In his budget address delivered at the territorial Legislative Council on 10 April 1997, Mr. R. O'Neal, Chief Minister and Minister of Finance, said that as of the end of 1996, the Territory had a recurrent surplus of $29.5 million, showing a 12.4 per cent increase in recurrent revenue collection for 1996 over 1995 levels. Of that recurrent surplus, $12.5 million was spent to fund the territorial public sector investment programme within the capital budget for 1996.

6. According to the Chief Minister and Minister of Finance, the territorial public debt servicing obligations for 1997 were $4,072,500, compared with $4,477,500 in 1996. As of 31 December 1996, the total public sector debt stood at $71 million.

C. Construction and development

7. The number of development applications submitted to the Town and Country Planning Department in 1996 totalled 273, a decrease of 18.26 per cent compared with the 1995 indicator. In that connection, the Government announced its intention to create in the Territory "an environment in which the construction industry could expand and flourish" and "create structures necessary for the socio-economic well-being".

D. Agriculture, livestock and fisheries

8. Agriculture is restricted to food crops and pasture, mainly on Tortola, Jost Van Dyke and Virgin Gorda. Food crops include fruits and vegetables; sugar cane is grown for the rum production industry. The Government has been encouraging investment in the sector, particularly in the establishment of hydroponic operations for fresh vegetable production. Stock raising is another subsector, primarily hybrids from Senegal and English Red Polls.

9. The Territory's coastal waters are rich in fish for both home consumption and export. The use of larger boats and more advanced technology has increased the size of the catch. The sector accounts for less than 10 per cent of the gross domestic product.

E. Industrial development

10. The manufacturing sector continued to have a low level of activity. The Government has for some time undertaken measures to stimulate this sector by strengthening and expanding the programmes of the Trade, Investment and Promotion Department.

11. In addition to the rum industry, there are two ice-making plants and some cottage industries catering primarily to the tourist market, as well as small boat manufacturing companies. The repair and maintenance of yachts is an important local industry. The Territory also produces some construction materials.

F. International business and finance

12. In his budget address, the Chief Minister and Minister of Finance stated that in 1996, 41,608 new international business companies were incorporated, bringing the total number of such companies at the end of that year to 210,000. As of 31 December 1996, 68 credit life companies, 56 captive companies, 2 reinsurance companies and 25 local insurance companies were operating in the British Virgin Islands in accordance with the territorial Insurance Act.

13. In order to intensify the efforts to diversify the financial services sector offerings and to enhance the attractiveness of the Territory as a financial services centre, in 1996 legislation was adopted in respect of limited partnership, limited life companies and mutual funds. The Government was also considering the introduction of legislation aiming at criminalizing all types of money laundering in the Territory as well as at ensuring that legislation and programmes related to the Territory's financial services accorded with internationally accepted standards.

G. Tourism

14. According to the budget address, visitor arrivals to the British Virgin Islands in 1995 increased by 7 per cent over the corresponding period in 1994, when they contributed $115 million in revenue. The increase was attributed to the intense promotional efforts on the part of the Tourist Board and of the industry itself.

IV. Social conditions

A. Labour

15. Information on the labour situation is contained in the 1995 working paper prepared by the Secretariat (see A/AC.109/2017, paras. 46-48).

B. Public health

16. The Territory continued to be served by the 50-bed Peebles Hospital on Tortola and by a number of health clinics throughout the Territory. There is also a private hospital. It is estimated that more than 50 per cent of medical care at the primary level is provided by private physicians. The Territory suffers from shortages of skilled nursing personnel. In 1995, the Territory had 20 doctors, 57 registered nurses, 32 nursing assistants, 4 pharmacies, 6 environmental health officers and 2 solid waste managers. The territorial Government has expressed its interest in the introduction of a national health insurance scheme to contribute to the financing of health care for its residents. In the meantime, the Department of Health has been formulating plans for new health centres in different communities and strengthening the existing centres.

C. Crime and crime prevention

17. Information on crime and crime prevention is contained in the 1995 working paper prepared by the Secretariat (see A/AC.109/2017, paras. 52-54).

V. Educational conditions

18. Education in the Territory continued to be free and compulsory for all children between 5 and 14 years of age. The territorial Government maintained as its priority the strengthening of the educational system. There are 18 public and 11 private primary schools on four islands: Tortola, Anegada, Virgin Gorda and Jost Van Dyke. There are two public high schools, one private high school and the Community College at Road Town.

VI. Participation in regional organizations and arrangements

19. The British Virgin Islands is an associate member of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and its subsidiary bodies, including the Caribbean Development and Coordination Committee. The Territory is an associate member of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) (see for details A/AC.109/2017, paras. 58-60).

VII. Future political status of the Territory

A. Position of the territorial Government

20. Information on the position of the territorial Government is contained in previous working papers prepared by the Secretariat (A/AC.109/1180, paras. 26-28 and A/AC.109/2017, para. 61).

B. Position of the administering Power

21. Information on the position of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland on the future status of the Territories under their administration is contained in document A/AC.109/2075, paras.34-36.

C. Action by the General Assembly

22. On 27 March 1997, the General Assembly adopted, without a vote, resolution 51/224 B, section IV of which concerns the British Virgin Islands.

Notes

[1] Information contained in the present working paper has been derived from information transmitted to the Secretary-General by the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under Article 73 *e* of the Charter of the United Nations on 6 May 1997.